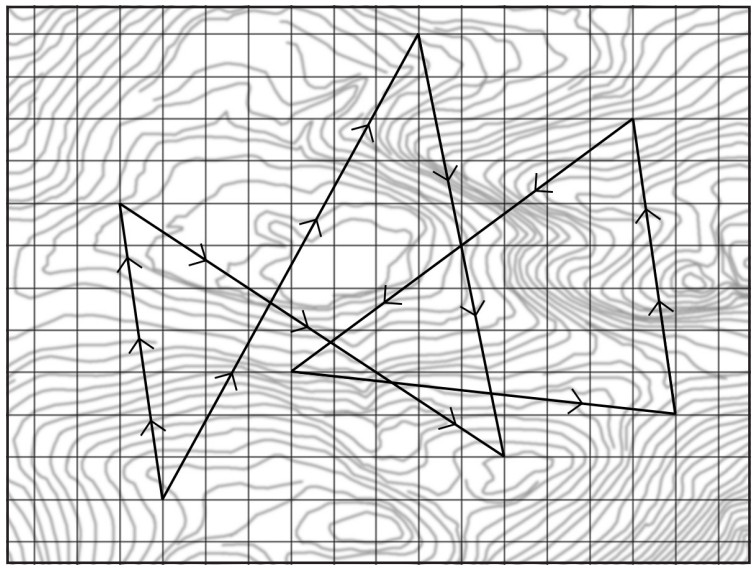
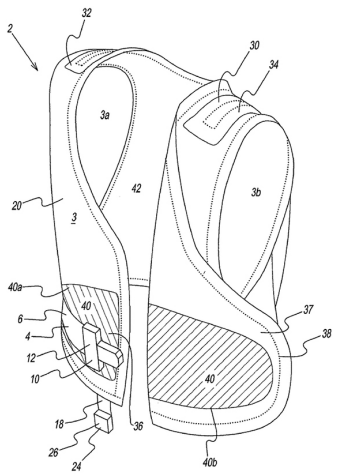
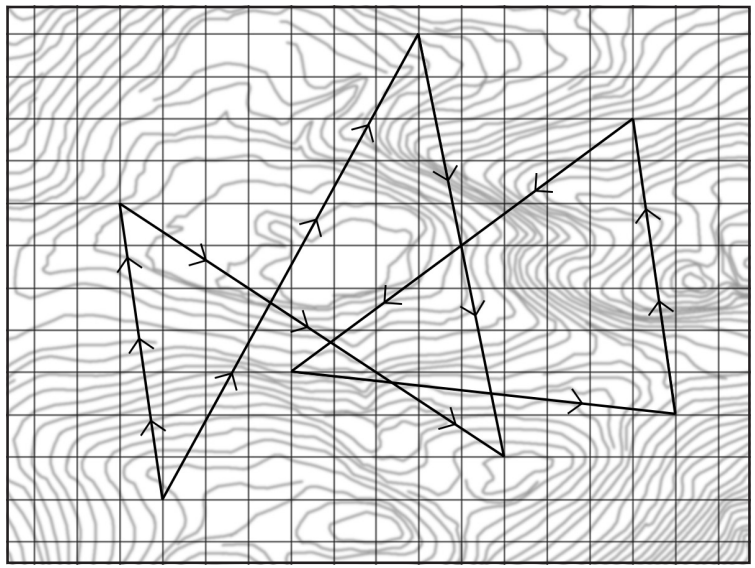


A FIELD GUIDE TO PROTESTS



the protest marshal



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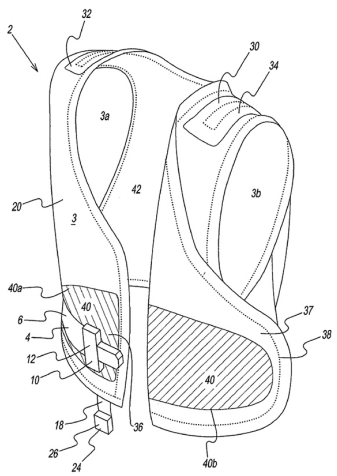

the protest marshal

I

The protest marshal wears a neon vest and has a walkie-talkie.

The protest marshal sets themself apart in the protest by wearing a high-visibility vest, making their position look like one of expertise and authority. The intention to be seen is paradoxical: even though they stand out visually, the generic safety vest makes them also look like the invisible worker of any urban environment. The walkie-talkie communicates to the crowd that they are included in a secret loop of information, setting them at a professional distance from the protesters. It appears like they are protesting with you but they are instructed to keep their distance. *The protest marshal relies on symbolic markers of legitimacy to aid in the control of the protest.*

X

The protest marshal's role can be fulfilled by anyone at the event.

The protest marshal exists at every protest, even without the neon vest. No one ever *just is* a protest marshal—they become one through their actions. People don't need to undergo specialized training to become a protest marshal—all it takes to become one is to reinforce the familiar and normal functioning of things. The protest marshal is anyone who draws upon morality ('property destruction is wrong') or perceived privilege ('you're only doing that cuz you're [white] [a man] [able-bodied]') to stop people from doing things. The attempts people make to be 'helpful' at events are generally done through actions intended to control and manage, rather than actions that would encourage the fight against those forces destroying our lives—like supporting queers to bash their bashers. Commands such as 'calm down' or 'don't do that' only aim to suppress another person's agency and reflect a fear of genuine expression. *Anyone who tries to manage and control the protest becomes a protest marshal.*

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IX The protest marshal is there to prevent outside agitators from hijacking the protest.

The protest marshal propagates the myth that anyone acting according to their own volition (i.e., against the orders of the protest marshal) must be an 'outside agitator', there only to hijack the 'peaceful' protest and ruin the validity of the message. According to the protest marshal, only tactics imagined to be legal or for ends within the law can be used, even if the means are in fact illegal. They are willing to go to some lengths (such as blocking highways, while deluding themselves that this is legal) but anything past an arbitrary limit is considered 'harmful' to the cause since autonomous action eludes the control of the protest marshal. 'Trouble makers' who would use any means necessary to oppose oppression are castigated as 'outsiders' regardless of what neighborhood they live in. *The protest marshal fails to understand that there is no 'outside' to police brutality, capitalism, or white supremacy.*

II The protest marshal is in constant contact with the organizer.

The protest marshal assumes the position of a protest 'expert', whose authority is not supposed to be challenged. The authority of the police can be called into question when it is obvious to everyone that they are acting 'unjustly'—e.g., when the police tear gas a bunch of 'peaceful protesters'. The authority of the protest marshal, however, with their aura of activist expertise, is not so obviously repressive. They want protesters to see them as helpful, legitimate, knowledgeable; as experts in dealing with the police and in protest 'safety'. They use this perceived position to control the protest and maintain the same order that the police keep with their tear gas and guns. *The control that the protest marshal wields over the protest stems from the perception that they are a leader of the group, or at least 'one of us'.*

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III

The protest marshal wants you to express yourself.

The protest marshal thinks it's your right to carry the craziest sign, chant the loudest chants, and take the most revolutionary selfies, as long as you follow the unspoken rules of obedience and only express yourself symbolically. The protest marshal has already determined *for you* how best to demonstrate without causing too much disruption. The protest marshal helps guarantee that expressions of rage have no direct effect on anything and that demonstrations remain non-events. Rather than acknowledging the differences that bring people into the streets and respecting the actions people might choose, they only see the enforced, empty unity espoused by the controlling organizations. Any action that might threaten the actual powers you are demonstrating against will attract the attention of the protest marshal, who is there to step in and stop anything that doesn't abide by their rules. *The protest marshal turns the protest into a parade, a perfect selfie opportunity, in which nothing actually happens.*

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VIII

The protest marshal believes we must respect the free speech of everyone.

The protest marshal advertises 'tolerance' and says we must treat all speech as equal. They believe in protecting everyone's 'right' to 'free speech' and think speech is something neutral. In prioritizing 'free speech' as a concept above its content, the protest marshal fails to understand that speech comes from a position oriented to history and does not exist in a vacuum of neutrality. Speech from white supremacists perpetuates white supremacy. Despite explicitly advocating for 'free speech', the protest marshal implicitly knows that speech is not neutral since they themselves censor speech that is deemed too 'hostile'. They smile when the crowd chants the harmless 'love trumps hate' but scold those yelling 'fuck the police', insisting on respect because they know where chants like that might lead. *The protest marshal speaks as though speech exists in a vacuum but acts in accordance with the reality that speech exists in a war.*

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VII

The protest marshal is against violence.

The protest marshal is determined to 'keep the peace' and promote 'non-violence' at events. They assert that 'violence' is antithetical to their 'non-violence'. In doing so, they neglect the reality that the 'peace' they are defending is merely the well-ordered violence of those who've won—i.e., the violence of the state, going back to Columbus and European slave traders, through rape culture, and carrying on today. This violence is so normalized that it has ceased to register as violence, since it goes into remission once established and only emerges to maintain the status quo. The protest marshal's insistence on 'non-violence' is a grotesque proposition when people's lives are threatened everyday. They're willing to betray anyone who would use any means to defend themselves against a world that makes life more and more unlivable. *The protest marshal believes that 'violence' and 'non-violence' are poles on a spectrum, when this spectrum is really only a tool of control to allow for some actions while condemning others that challenge the normal operation of power.*

IV

The protest marshal is trained in the art of managing crowds.

The protest marshal exists on the margins of the protest. They move in formation, encircling the crowd, cutting through groups and forming a line between protesters and the police. This modification of the crowd's spatial form is effective because it doesn't appear as control at all. The protest marshal appears as a perfectly objective observer, refraining from chanting or carrying signs, simply moving people along the pre-established route. They undergo professional training given by non-profit organizations and are sometimes directly taught by the police. They're shown the basics of crowd management, risk assessment, and how to profile and single out anyone deemed 'undesirable' or 'uncontrollable'. *The protest marshal subtly conducts the protest to ensure an event that is easily manageable and doesn't threaten to break out of the limits set by the 'professional' activists and police.*

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V

The protest marshal defends oppressed people from the police.

The protest marshal believes they 'protect' protesters from the police while they actually assist in carrying out police operations. Like the police, they see themselves as the guarantor of everyone's safety, but the 'safety' they intend to maintain is seldom defined. How 'safe' is it when the normal order of things produces unsafe and unlivable conditions for most people? Deportations, police murder, and ecological destruction are not exceptional occurrences, they are part of the normal operation of modern society. Open businesses, open roads, and a smooth functioning city all facilitate these operations and help make them possible. By prioritizing the normal functioning of the city, the protest marshal ensures that the protest will not actually disrupt the conditions of a society where black life doesn't matter. *Whatever the intentions and personal identity of the protest marshal, they hold a structural position aligned with the police, which can only fortify white supremacy.*

VI

The protest marshal allows the police to be virtually invisible at demonstrations.

The protest marshal helps ensure that the police keep a good image. It looks bad when the police are beating (white) people with batons and deploying their arsenal of weapons, so the protest marshal is there to improve police-public relations. The protest marshal, exhibiting their authority, assures everyone that they 'know' the police will react only if 'provoked' by certain disruptive actions. Whether the protest marshal is explicitly working with the police (like negotiating with them about getting a crowd off a highway) or imagining themself as 'protecting' protesters from the police (by controlling and subduing the crowd), the protest marshal does the work of police so that the police can recede into the background. *The protest marshal is deputized to diffuse the power of the police, which has the duel function of blurring the line between citizen and cop and also expanding the reign of the police by creating a mobile, 'community'-appointed surveillance unit.*

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